

“The Patient Parent”
A Sermon Preached by Frank Mansell III
John Knox Presbyterian Church – Indianapolis, Indiana
September 25, 2011

Exodus 17: 1-7

I really love this story. It's not because of the language or the way the Hebrew is phrased. It's not because of the way an overarching theme of the Book of Exodus is weaved intricately within this short narrative.

No, I really love this story because Moses is faced with what almost every pastor has to deal with: complaints! Actually, it's not just pastors who have to deal with complaints; it's anyone who is in a leadership position. Whenever we offer guidance or assistance to move a group forward, the people we are leading can either be receptive to our ideas, or wish their own ideas were being utilized. That can be when the complaints start to arise, and we wish we could slip into the background.

At first glance, this passage from Exodus appears to be about whining. The Israelites are complaining in the wilderness, and Moses is like an impatient parent with a griping child. And while that is what it looks like at first, what we eventually discover is that it's a story about realizing the sacrifices we are called to make for spiritual health, and that God will not abandon us – even when we complain.

If you only read the two chapters preceding this in Exodus, you might think the only thing the Israelites did for forty years was complain. As soon as they crossed the Red Sea, and the Egyptians were left behind, the Israelites immediately started whining. First, it was the water at Marah which was too bitter to drink (15:22-27). Then it was their hunger for something to eat in the wilderness (16:1-36). In both cases, the people “complained against Moses,” and even wished they were back in the land of Egypt. In both cases, Moses turned to God and asked, “What shall I do?” And in both cases, the Lord answered Moses’ plea: he turned the bitter water sweet, and he sent manna from heaven, so that the Israelites would not starve.

Which brings us to chapter 17 today. First, you have the setting: “From the wilderness of Sin the whole congregation of the Israelites journeyed by stages, as the Lord commanded. They camped at Rephidim, but there was no water for the people to drink” (17:1). The people have been in the wilderness for some time, and they come to Rephidim, where the campsite has no water, and the Israelites are cranky. “Give us water to drink. Why did you bring us out of Egypt, to kill us and our children and livestock with thirst” (17:2-3)? It's oddly familiar to family vacations, isn't it? “I'm hungry! I'm thirsty! Why

couldn't we have just stayed home and not be trapped in this stupid car?"

Second, you get another set of complaints, but this time they come from the leader himself. "Moses said to them, 'Why do you quarrel with me? Why do you test the Lord?'" After spewing off to the Israelites, Moses then takes it to God: "What shall I do with this people? They are almost ready to stone me" (17:2,4). It's almost like Moses has to take the load of complaints from the people and disperse them somewhere else, and that somewhere else is God. In modern terms, we would say Moses did a good job of finding a place to "blow off steam."

Third, God responds to the problem and the lament of his servant. The Lord tells him to go ahead, take the staff which he raised at the Nile, and strike the rock at Horeb. From there, water will flow "so that the people may drink." Walter Brueggemann comments: "At the center of the narrative is the faithful, powerful intervention of God. The story is told as a witness of faith in order to place God's powerful fidelity and attentiveness as the middle term of the whole human drama, as life is moved from hunger to fullness, from thirst to water, from blindness to sight, from leprosy to cleanness, from poverty to well-being, and in the end, from death to life" (Walter Brueggemann, *New Interpreter's Bible, Volume 1*: Abingdon Press, Nashville, ©1994: 818).

Perhaps the key verse in the midst of all this complaining – by the Israelites, by Moses, by us – is verse 6. After Moses is told to go forward to Horeb in faith, God says to him – and to us: "I will be standing there in front of you." I will be there before you. Wherever you go, whatever you do, however you follow me – I will be there before you. God will not give us a solution to our problem and then abandon us in our journey. God promises to be there before us, and God is there before us.

One of the challenges of having critics is deciding how you will respond to them. You can either get defensive, shutting out what they say about you. Or you can discern the elements of truth in their words, and seek to grow stronger as a result.

I may have shared these thoughts before, but I think James Armstrong's words bear repeating. He writes: "So often when the critic's voice is heard we grow defensive. We wear blinders and earplugs. We withdraw into shells of denials. But if we are to grow we must deal with reality. There's an old Hungarian proverb that says, 'If one person calls you a horse – laugh at him. If a second person calls you a horse – think about it. If a third person calls you a horse – buy a saddle.' Listen to your critics, and learn from them. Moses learned that he couldn't go it alone. He needed to rely on others. A one-person show is an ill-fated show. The prima-donna, the 'lone-ranger,' is extinct in today's society" (James Armstrong, "Here's to Critics!" www.csec.org/csec/sermon/armstrong_3702.html).

The assurance Moses received at Meribah was that even when he received complaints, God would be there before him. Even when he struggled with what to do next, God would help him discern what he needed to be a stronger, healthier, more effective leader of the Israelites. That happens throughout Moses' life. And at the end of Moses' life, we would expect a great reward for this tremendous leader of God's people, for the man who withstood all the Israelites' complaining! Yet, this man who stood up to Pharaoh, who led the Israelites through the Nile, who listened to their complaints and was immeasurably patient with them, is told, "You shall not cross into this promised land." Moses was the one to lead Israel through the wilderness, but he died before they entered the land of Canaan. How can this be for one of God's greatest leaders?

Carol Miles writes: *I think Moses is told that he can view the promised land but not go in, not because of some sin he has committed, but that is simply the nature of ministry. We pastors and preachers do our jobs from the top of Mount Nebo. But we can't take the people to the promised land. Only God can take them there.*

You know, I always cringe when I hear pastors use phrases like, "My church" or "my people." And I know what they mean; I'm prone to say the same thing, "My church, my school, my students." But I want to make sure that we are self-conscious about it. Because for me, anyway, I need a regular reminder that the people I serve are not my people. They are God's people. Because it's just too easy for me to fall into the pattern of thinking that I am ultimately responsible for the spiritual lives of the people I serve.

It's not ultimately up to me. It's not about me at all. I am not the only person who will speak to others the Word of God on their lips. Faith: the assurance of things hoped for, the conviction of things not seen. That whole wonderful chapter of the Book of Hebrews is about people like Moses, who never got to see the promise of God fulfilled in their lifetime. People who were asked to live their lives on a wager that the Word of God was true (Carol Miles, *Reclaiming the Text* Conference, Montreat, North Carolina, May 30, 2007).

In the end, Moses realized it wasn't about his glory, his reward, his legacy. It was what was best for the people and their future – a future where God was standing there before them, rewarding their faithful risk that his promise was true. Faith is not about accomplishing our own feats with God's help. Faith is about accomplishing God's feats through the Spirit's power in us. Faith is realizing it's not about us; it's all about God.

I'd like to finish where I started. Complain versus critique. I think there is a huge difference between those two verbs. To complain implies sharing our displeasure about someone or something, without taking any responsibility ourselves for improving the situation. To

critique implies that we are wishing to make something stronger and better, while being held accountable for our participation in it. It seems that in our public, political discourse, and often in our discourse within the church, we have fallen into the habit of complaining – even whining. We would prefer to voice our displeasure about an opponent or differing opinion, without having to take responsibility for our part in it.

To reflect the faith and strength which God gives us in Jesus Christ, we are called to do better than that. We are called to critique, to strengthen, to improve by jumping into the mess, not yelling at the mess from the sidelines. As we see throughout the biblical witness, God calls men and women to affect positive change in the people's lives – not by standing on the periphery, but by taking risks in the midst of the chaos. We do not need to fear what might happen, and thus stand outside and whine away.

We must trust – as Moses did – in the most patient of parents, who will be there in front of us, even when we doubt, even when we question, but also when we take leaps of faith and trust in the wager that the Word of God is true.

May our individual and collective lives be offerings of thanksgiving to our Lord that we are grateful for his presence before us, and may our faith be a sign to others that God will provide, if only we believe.

Thanks be to God. Amen.